

THE MISER AND HIS CAKE (preamble to Illisa Jataka)

A long time ago, there was a treasurer of a kingdom who was a millionaire. He had so much money but he never spent it. He wouldn't spend money on his family, and certainly wouldn't donate money to help other people. He wouldn't even spend money on himself. He just loved having the money and keeping it safe for himself.

One day, when the treasurer was on his way home from the palace after working for the king, he saw a very thin and poor man who was eating a small cake. The treasurer felt very hungry, and wanted cake too. When he arrived at his house, he thought to himself,



“If I say that I want a cake, then a whole bunch of other people will want to have some cake too, and making enough cake for all of them will use up a lot of my rice flour, butter and sugar. I must not say anything to anyone.”

He imagined everyone in the house, including the servants and visitors, craving and clamoring for some cake if they saw him with a cake.

He was really, really hungry, and he was craving some cake. But he didn't want to have to share cake with others. He walked around, pacing back and forth, trying to control his craving. Hour after hour, he felt more and more miserable. He couldn't stand it anymore, so he went to his bedroom and lay down hugging his bed.

His wife saw him laying in bed, looking sick and miserable. She rubbed his back gently and said, “What's the matter, dear?”

He replied, "Nothing."

She said, "Maybe the king was upset with you?"

"No, he was not," he replied.

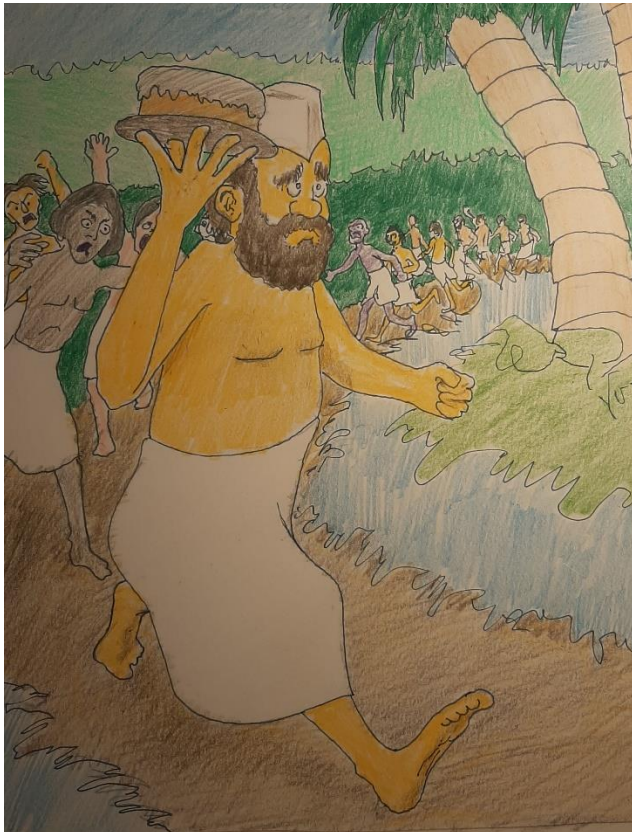
His wife asked, "Have your children or servants done anything to annoy you?"

"Nothing of that kind, either," he said.

"Well then, is there anything that you want?" she asked. The treasurer wouldn't say a word, because of his silly fear that he would be wasting his things – his butter, rice flour and sugar – on other people. He lay there speechless on the bed.

His wife insisted, "Speak, dear, tell me what it is you want."

The treasurer couldn't keep it a secret anymore. "Yes," he said with a gulp, "I do have a craving for one thing."



"And what is that, my dear?" she asked.

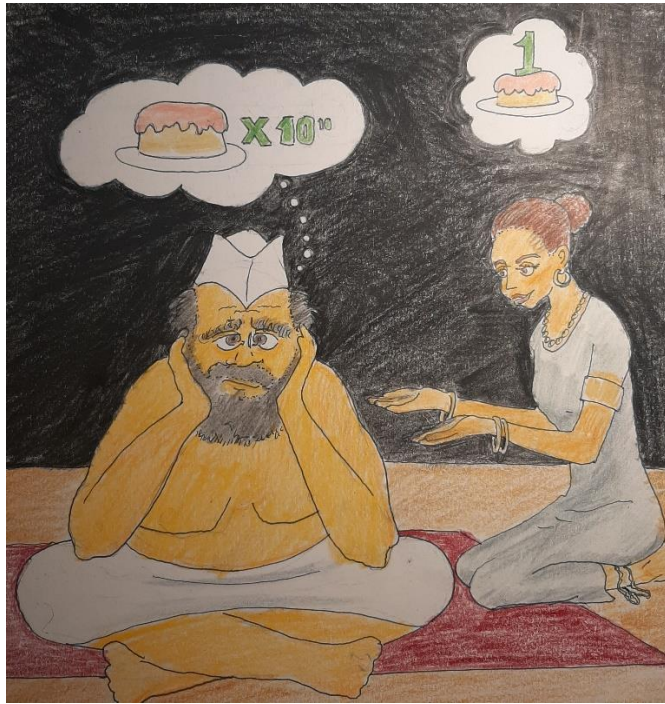
"I would like a cake to eat."

His wife exclaimed, "Why didn't you say that before? You're rich enough! I'll bake enough cakes to have a feast for the whole town!"

Imagining all the townspeople running after his cakes, he said, "Why worry about them? They should work for their own meal."

The wife then suggested, "Well then, I'll bake only enough for the people who live on our street."

The treasurer said, as if to mock her, “How generous you are!”



The wife then suggested, “Then I’ll bake just enough for our own household.”

He responded, “How extravagant you are!”

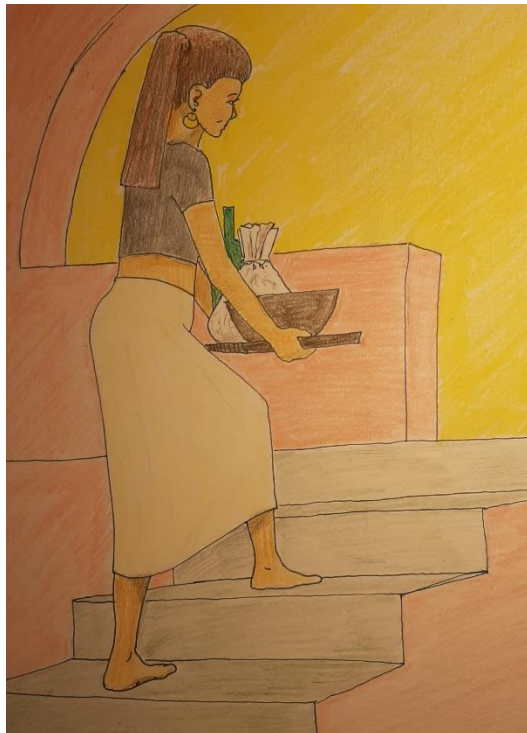
She said, “Very well, I’ll bake only enough for our children.”

He said, “Why bother about them?”

“Okay then, I’ll only provide cake for you and me,” she sighed.

“Why should you be in it?” he dared to say to her.

“Then I’ll bake just enough for you alone,” she said, almost in tears, with a defeated voice.



The treasurer grinned, saying, “Do it quietly. There are a lot of people watching whether anyone is cooking here. Take the pots and just a little of the ingredients for the cake to the seventh floor of our house, and do the baking up there. There I will sit alone and undisturbed to eat.”

The wife obeyed. She sent the servants away so they would not know what is happening, and climbed the stairs all the way up to the seventh story of their huge house. Then, she sent a messenger to bring the treasurer.

The treasurer climbed up the seven-story staircase, and bolted the door at each stairwell. When her husband arrived in the room, she started baking the cakes.

A powerful yogi knew what was going on with the treasurer, and wanted to do something about his possessiveness - his dislike of sharing and generosity. So, he went to the treasurer's house.

Then, by his supernatural power, he rose up to sit in mid-air in front of the window of the seventh-story room where the treasurer and his wife were hiding. Although it was common for holy men to come to the front door of a house to receive donations of food, the totally unexpected sight of the yogi at the seventh story window made the treasurer shiver in fear, and he thought,



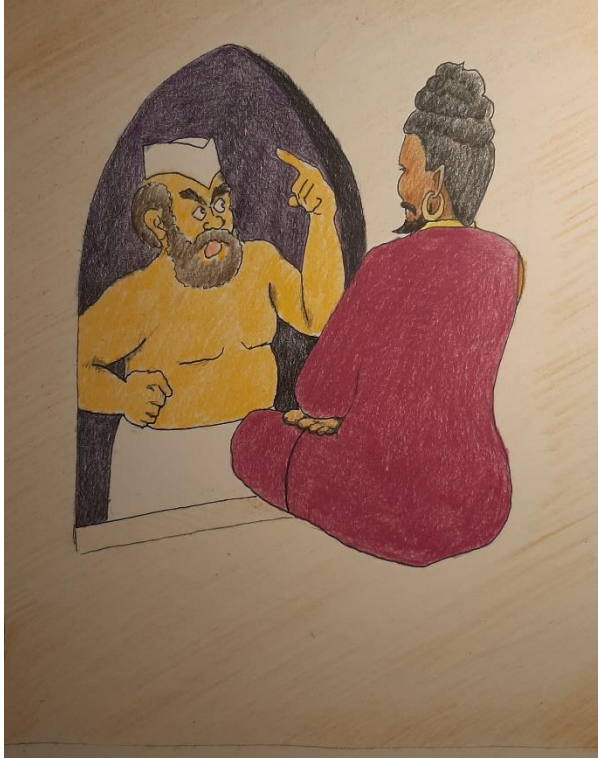
“It was to escape such visitors that I climbed up here. And now there's one of them at the window!”

His mind could not think about how a person could be floating in mid-air, why he was there, who he was, or what he was – a ghost, sorcerer or holy man. All he could do was feel rage that the person should not be there.

He sputtered angrily,

“What will you get, yogi, by your simply sitting in mid-air? You can pace up and down until you've made a path in the air, and yet you will still get nothing!”

The yogi began to walk back and forth in the air in front of the window.



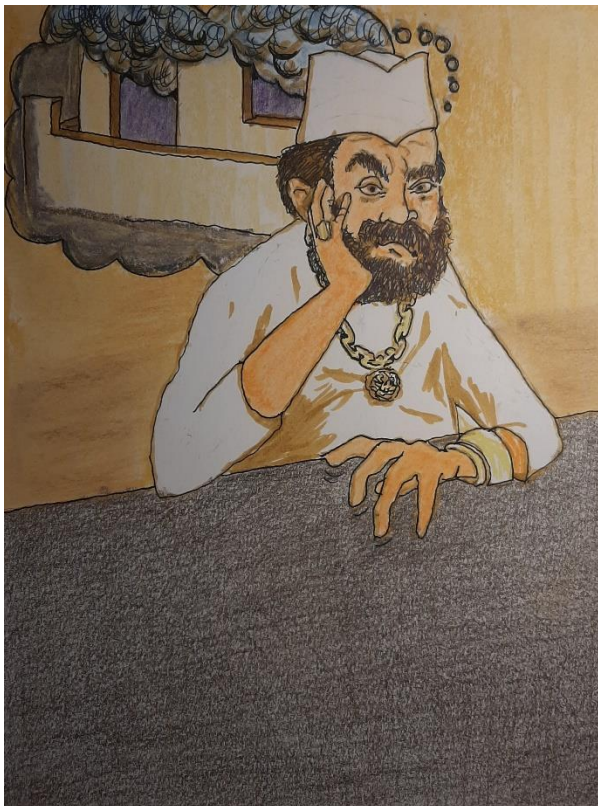
The treasurer shouted, "What will you get by walking back and forth? You can sit cross-legged and meditate in the air, but you'll still get nothing!"

The yogi sat cross-legged in mid-air.

Then said the treasurer, "What will you get by sitting there? You can come and sit on the window sill, but even that won't get you anything!"

The yogi sat on the window sill.

The treasurer yelled, "What will you get by sitting on the window sill? You can belch smoke, and yet you'll still get nothing!"



Then the yogi belched smoke until the whole house was filled with it.

The treasurer tried to keep busy as if nothing was happening. He put on his shirt. But his eyes began to burn as if there were needles in his eyes. He almost blurted out,

"You won't get anything even if you burst into flames," but he was afraid his house might be set on fire. He thought,

"This yogi is most persistent! He simply won't go away empty-handed! I must have just one cake made for him."

He told his wife, "My dear, bake one little cake and give it to the yogi to get rid of him."

So, she mixed just a little bit of dough and put it in a pan. But the dough swelled up and kept swelling up until it filled the whole pan. The treasurer looked over at the pan full of dough, and exclaimed,

“What a lot you must have used!”

Then he took a tiny bit of dough in the tip of a spoon and put it in another pan, and then put it in the oven to bake. But that tiny piece of dough grew even larger than what happened to the first spoonful his wife had put in the pan! He tried again and again putting a tiny bit of dough in a pan, and each one grew into a huge full pan of dough!

He gave up and, pointing to the basket of cakes his wife had already made for him, he said, “You give him a cake, dear.”

She picked up a cake, but all of the other cakes stuck to it. She was shocked. She tried and tried to separate one from the others, but they were all stuck together as if they were glued. She cried out to her husband,

“They’re all stuck together! I can’t get them apart!”

The treasurer said, “I’ll get them apart!”

He tried to separate the cakes, but they stuck together like glue. Then husband and wife both grabbed the cakes at the edge and tried to get them apart. As hard as they tried pulling them apart, they were absolutely stuck.

After pulling at the cakes and not getting even one to come loose, the treasurer was sweating with the effort, and he noticed that he didn’t want the cakes anymore. His craving was gone. He said,

“I really don’t want the cakes anymore. Give them, basket and all, to that yogi.”

The wife offered the whole basket of cakes to the yogi.

The yogi told them about the Three Gems – the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha - and taught them about giving. He made them clearly understand the good results of generosity, sharing and other good deeds.

The treasurer listened very carefully and thought very deeply about what the yogi was saying. He was very moved, and said in an emotional trembling voice,

“Sir, come here and sit on this couch to eat your cakes.”

The yogi said, “Dear treasurer, there are 500 yogis waiting for a meal of cakes. If you would like, you can bring your wife and the cakes and come with me to them.”

The treasurer asked, “Where are they?”

The yogi said, “Forty-five leagues away.”

The treasurer was puzzled, and asked, “How are we to go all that way, sir, without taking a very long time traveling?”

The yogi answered, “Dear treasurer, if you would like, I will transport you there by my supernatural powers. The top of the staircase will stay where it is, but the bottom of the staircase shall be the main gate of where the yogis are waiting. In this way, I will transport you in the time it takes to walk down downstairs.”

As they arrived at the bottom of the staircase, they discovered they were at a gate behind which were waiting the yogis. The treasurer and his wife served the yogis all of the cakes, and then sat down and ate cake also. They noticed that even after they served everyone, there were many cakes left. It seemed impossible that there could be leftover cakes after feeding so many people!

The treasurer and his wife politely said goodbye to all and walked out the gate, where they found themselves at the bottom of the staircase of their house. The treasurer felt very pleased when he had served all the yogis the cakes and satisfied their hunger. He understood that generosity made him feel happy, and that his selfishness had made him miserable. He gave up all of his selfish habits and became a generous man for the rest of his life.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why didn't the treasurer immediately tell his wife he wanted cake? (he knew others would want some and he didn't want to share)
2. If he shared cake with others, which ingredients was he afraid would be used up or wasted on other people? (flour, butter and sugar)
3. Why did the treasurer finally tell his wife to bake the yogi a cake? (the yogi wouldn't go away from the window and filled the house with smoke)
4. What happened to the cake dough when they tried to put a little bit in the pan? (it swelled up and filled the pan)
5. What happened when the wife tried to give the yogi a cake from the basket of cakes? (it stuck to the other cakes)
6. How did the treasurer feel about the cakes when they all stuck together? (he didn't want them anymore)
7. How did he feel when he served cakes to all the yogis? (happy)

DHARMA DISCUSSION – Possessiveness and Generosity:

How did the treasurer feel when he was craving for cake? Miserable.
How do you think he felt when his wife was secretly baking cakes for him?
He was worried, fearful that someone might find out.
So he locked the doors and had to climb up seven flights of steps.
Although he was looking forward to enjoying the cakes, he was not relaxed.

He was "possessive," which means he likes to keep his own things all to himself and not share them.

People who are possessive often worry that someone might take away their things, or might lose, break, or damage them, or might use them up. They feel very uncomfortable when someone might want something of theirs.

They often say, "That's mine!" "Don't touch!" "Give it back!" "Get off my things!" "You can't have it!"

Have you ever said something like that? We all probably have.
Have you ever felt uncomfortable when someone touches something of yours, worrying they might take it away or ruin it?
We all have felt that way sometimes, especially if it's something we really need that's fragile or expensive.
And most of us have had an experience where someone actually did lose or break something of ours.
That may make us feel more possessive, worried it might happen again.
We don't want someone to break or lose something else of ours!
But if we often have those feelings, or if we very often feel uncomfortable sharing, then we are too attached to our things, too possessive, and we end up like the treasurer - very worried and stressed.

When did the treasurer get over his worry and finally feel happy?
When he served the cakes to the yogis - when he was generous.
So, what did he learn about possessiveness, generosity and happiness?
He learned that keeping his things for himself, being possessive, didn't bring him happiness. Instead, it brought him stress, fear, and anger.
And he learned that generosity made him feel happy.

How did it happen, that the very thing he didn't want to do – to share – ended up bringing him happiness?
Because the worry, fear and anger that goes along with possessiveness disappears when you give it up – when you decide that clinging to your things isn't worth it, and you let go of your attachment to your things.
When you are generous, giving to others, sharing with others, you give up your attachment to those things.
The more often you are generous, the more you are letting go of attachment to things, and giving up that clingy, worried feeling.
The best way to overcome our possessiveness is by being generous.

What if a selfish person tries to manipulate you or force you to give or share? Is it generous to give to him? No, that would be giving out of fear.
And that may not be the right person to share with.
Instead, we share with someone because we care about them;
we give or share with loving-kindness.

ⁱ This story has been modified from the original, in which the Buddha sent his disciple, Venerable Mogallana (Maudgalyayana) to the miser's home and to bring the miser to Jetavana to serve cakes to the Buddha and 500 monks.